

# TORREYA

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## Common Plants as Domestic Remedies in Maine

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From my earliest recollection many plants were highly esteemed as medicine and collected at the correct time, dried, spread, and generally hung in bags in the attic. Some gathered only a few; others many, as certain women were noted for their skill in compounding medicines from "roots and yarbs," although I never knew them to sell a remedy but in neighborly fashion take it in time of sickness or respond to a request for it.

The main divisions appear to be, bitter tonics and appetizers, alteratives, cough remedies, intestinal astringents, diuretics, "salves" and healing ointments. Some kept a secret the exact ingredients, especially of "salves." Our attic was always redolent of tansy and pennyroyal, catnip and spearmint, great bundles of thoroughwort hung from the rafters, also mullein, cleavers, snake's head, motherwort and mugwort, hops, wormwood, etc.

In the spring after the traditional sulphur and molasses to "clear the blood," a bitter tonic was made of the root of yellow dock (*Rumex crispus*), dandelion root, barberry bark or root and a swallow taken before meals—a nauseous dose. The mucilaginous root of elecampane was used in the same way, sometimes with the addition of one or more of these, burdock, tansy, hops, thoroughwort! But thoroughwort (*E. perfoliatum*) was par excellence the remedy in hard colds of the type of influenza, with much headache, muscular pains, and prostration, and in regular medicine it is a valuable remedy in just these ills. Our mothers could not afford to call a doctor for every ailment of the children and learned domestic remedies. A mustard foot-bath, "thoroughwort tea" and a good sweat, keeping the patient in bed afterwards "broke up" many a cold. If children or adult had a "cankered sore mouth," gold thread was used or

the red berries of sumac, both apparently efficacious. They fought so against the bitterest medicines, that a mild tonic of sarsaparilla root was given (*Aralia nudicaulis*) in the spring. "Saffron tea" was considered helpful in jaundice of infants or to "bring out the measles." Sweet flag was used as a vermifuge, aided by pumpkin seeds, which were used as a diuretic as well. In adults juniper berries were used as a diuretic in urinary difficulties. "Chamomile tea" was made sometimes from *Anthemis Cotula* (to take which was a terrible ordeal). Nose-bleed was treated by yarrow (*A. millefolium*) which has in homeopathic medicine a legitimate use in hemorrhage. In kidney troubles, cleavers was given (*G. asprellum*—and this was also used to fill straw beds.) Slippery-elm bark and cherry bark were valued ingredients of cough-syrup, to which was sometimes added concentrated syrup of beet juice. My mother made a cough syrup famous in the community, much in demand for asthma and chronic bronchitis, of which *Lobelia inflata* was an important element and sometimes mullein and horehound. (*Lobelia* was collected in August or September after the capsules were inflated, these and the root being the most powerful, though all parts are used in medicine. The U. S. Dispensatory gives it as valuable in asthma and spasmodic bronchitis.) However as a rule mullein was used in a so-called "bath" (fomentation) which meant that a flannel bag of several thicknesses was filled with mullein leaves first heated, "steeped" in vinegar, then applied to the painful part, generally the abdomen, in cramps, colics and stomach aches. Tansy and hops were used in the same way and the moist heat certainly relaxed and soon relieved ordinary pain. Warts on our youthful hands sometimes disappeared by magic when white oak chips were steeped and the liquid applied. This was at times used when an astringent effect was needed on "sores" and ulcers.

"Pine pitch" was wonderfully healing and was used alone or with hot "mutton tallow" and beeswax on cracks of the hands and chronic ulcers with great relief. Witch hazel, also balm of Gilead buds in rum were used on bruises and superficial cuts. There was always a bottle of these buds in rum. Wormwood was used for sprained ankles or muscular soreness, an excellent remedy. In fevers, horse-radish leaves with or without vinegar were applied to the soles of the feet, burdock and plantain leaves

being used in the same way. If a patient were nervous and restless, a "poultice" (fomentation) of hops to the feet or abdomen was thought to soothe. Children were given for colds such mild remedies as "catnip tea," "spearmint tea" and thoroughwort for hard colds.

A persistent diarrhoea called for "wire-bush tea" a decoction of *Spiraea tomentosa*. This was also given to calves with the "scours."

*Cypripedium acaule* ("valerian," nerve-root) was given to nervous women, hysterical and sleepless; as it was given in rum, sometimes the most temperate of women slept profoundly after taking it! The rum-cherry (black) in rum or brandy and blackberry cordial were valuable in diarrhoea. Cherry bark in rum was a remedy for coughs. An analysis of many of the patent medicines like Peruna and Paine's Celery Compound shows that our Puritan ancestors in a prohibition state did not disdain the use of alcoholics! under the guise of medicine. The "snake's head" and "stingo" used as a tonic by the elders was *Chelone glabra* in rum ("stingo" being the popular name for whiskey or rum.)

The old folks made wine and ink of elderberries and snuff of pulverized bayberry leaves (*M. cerifera*) which, from the resulting sneezes, was surely powerful! Bayberry was used in candles, of course.

The bark of hornbeam, *Carpinus caroliniana*, was used in indigestion. Hops in addition to the uses mentioned was put in rootbeer and new twigs of black birch and sassafras root added. This was thought to be tonic in effect and a pleasant beverage.

After childbirth or in diseases of women, both motherwort and mugwort were used. Pennyroyal was used for cramps and it as well as tansy was taken in the hope of its being an abortifacient; smeared on the face and hands it kept away mosquitos.

*Chimaphila umbellata* "Noble Pine" was used in cases of tuberculosis and it was popularly believed that "if one chewed a leaf a day, it would prevent consumption."

Phytolacca or "garget" was used to "doctor" cows with garget. (It is a valuable medicine in the treatment of glandular infections and a certain type of throat infection.) Onions and cranberries were used as poultices and the former for colds.

Calendula blossoms were crushed and put in alcohol, used on sprains and cuts of horses and cows. Sometimes a salve was made in tallow. Perhaps there is no more healing ointment than that made of Calendula in modern times, in spite of the scepticism of the U. S. Dispensatory.

Plantain was crushed and put on poison ivy eruption, as was jewel weed (*Impatiens biflora*). A salve made from plantain was healing and soothing to ulcers and hemorrhoids. St. Johnswort (*H. perforatum*) was used on bruises and on stiff muscles.

Grated horse-chestnuts made into a "salve" were also applied to hemorrhoids.

After months of cold winter without green vegetables and canning not having reached its present extent, anything that could be used as greens was welcomed and considered in some degree medicinal, particularly dock and dandelions, horseradish, grated or the leaves as greens, mustard, cowslips, pigweed, red-root, house-leek, "pusley," milkweed, unfolding brakes, phytolacca sprouts, "tongue" (aster), "wild beet," *Saxifraga Pennsylvanica* being the chief herbs used. *Geranium maculatum* and ordinary red clover were known as "blood remedies" and healing for sore mouths. *Ledum groenlandicum*, "Labrador tea" was esteemed as a tonic. *Lycopus Virginicus* was used for some ailment and viburnums of various kinds in cramps. These "teas" were decoctions and infusions prepared by "steeping" and would not keep unless in alcohol or syrups. It is interesting to note that while many of these remedies are still used in homeopathic and eclectic medicine, the U. S. Dispensatory dismisses most of them as of little or no value. A few quotations follow:

Anise seed used in colic (sometimes caraway do.)

*Berberis vulgaris*, bark of the root—bitter tonic, mild laxative, used in liver trouble.

Calendula *flowers* no virtues but used as a local application in inflammations, wounds and ulcers.

U. S. D. often refers to a plant as used in "days of therapeutic darkness," "no action, feeble action, etc."

*Chimaphila umbellata*, used by No. Am. Indians in scrofula or rheumatism—no properties except feeble diuretic.

*Coptis trifolia*, simple bitter tonic. In N. E. used as local application in aphthous ulcerations of the mouth.

U. S. D. says yellow Cypripedium known as "Am. Valerian."

"Male Nervine" is a gentle nervous stimulant or antispasmodic—but does not mention *C. acaule* which was used in Maine and is not mentioned in U. S. D.

Eupatorium is damned with faint praise, when the book says it may be useful in formative stages of colds and similar disorders.

*Rhus glabra*, mild and pleasant astringent and gargle.

*Geranium maculatum*, one of our best indigenous astringents and a popular domestic remedy for diarrhoea, gargle in sore throat and cankers.

Hamamelis—of slight value though used for all ills flesh is heir to.

*Inula Helenium*—a tonic, gentle stimulant probably of no service for other diseases.

Juniper berries used as a diuretic.

Lappa—alterative, diuretic, etc. no reason to believe of medicinal value. Leaves used externally in eruptions and ulcers.

Pepo used in tape worm for over a century.

Phytolacca, the dried root an emetic, purgative, narcotic—used as alterative, gargle and ointment.

*Rumex crispus*, alterative, laxative (in homeopathy used for a cough.)

Taraxacum, a former cholagogic for torpid liver, of doubtful value.

Mullein used in pectoral complaints, the oil for hemorrhoids and inflammations, fomentation of leaves as an anodyne, dried leaves smoked in asthma and bronchitis.

White pine bark in cough syrup, has no virtue.

Pitch used in some sluggish skin diseases.

Balm of Gilead buds, counter irritant in muscular rheumatism and expectorant in bronchitis.

*Prunus serotina* in cough syrup, of doubtful value.

*Quercus alba*, an astringent wash.

*Rhus glabra*, an astringent gargle.

Hops, hop pillow, hop fomentation, bitter tonic, possible sedative.

Among unofficial drugs of U. S. Dispensatory are:

Wormwood

Achillea

Aesculus

Chelone, tonic, aperient, act on liver

*Anthemis Cotula*

*Hypericum perforatum* in olive oil a home remedy for bruises and wounds

*Impatiens biflora*, fresh juice for Rhus poison

*Ledum groenlandicum* in rheumatism homeopathically, substitute for tea and a tonic

*Liatris scariosa*, for snake bites

*Lycopus virginiana*, astringent, narcotic (Homeopathically used for goitre)

*Spiraea tomentosa*, roots used in treatment of diarrhoea, flowers diuretic

Tansy, domestic abortifacient, has no such effect but is a poison, aromatic bitter tonic

Mullein oil in ear-ache

*Trifolium pratense*—blood remedy

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